# Open education

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# Open education: the need for a critical approach

Sian Bayne, Jeremy Knox, Jen Ross, The University of Edinburgh

This special issue is concerned with developing critical approaches to open education: about delving deeper into what we mean when we use this term, how it is recognised and understood, and how the particular claims of open education influence policy and manifest in practice. We hope the work collected here will contribute to the continued development and embedding of this area of educational practice.

'Openness' has become a highly charged and politicised term, a movement operating in many areas outside of education (open knowledge, open government, open access, open data, open source, open culture). In the process it has acquired a sheen of naturalized common sense and legitimacy, and formed what seems to be a post-political space of apparent consensus. Invitations to question openness are quite rare, particularly within a field like education that is above all motivated by a desire to exchange knowledge, to make it accessible, and to positively affect the lives of individuals. However, it is precisely this view of openness – as a virtue of natural worth – that is problematic, not only because it masks alternative perspectives, but also because it does so with an apparent moral authority that renders the critic at best a technophobe and a cynic, and at worst an elitist and a champion of the status quo. Indeed, we think that in this moment when it is perhaps least fashionable to question open education that critical perspectives are most urgently needed.

Open education is gaining increasing traction, perhaps most noticeably through relatively recent high-profile online initiatives such as the Open Educational Resources movement (OER) and Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs), but also many other moves which attempt to widen access to education or challenge the perceived dominance of established institutional provision. Prominent conferences are devoted to the subject, such as the *Open Education Conference*. In 2015 it was entitled '*Mainstreaming Open Education*[1]', and in 2016 it is set to be '*Open Culture*'[2], signalling not only a growing confidence in open education as a field in itself, but also the sense that a desire to enact extensive institutional and cultural reform is intrinsic to the movement. This highlights the oppositional structure assumed by the calls for open education which, in championing the 'open', simultaneously suppose the existence of an education that is *closed* and inherently contrary to contemporary ideals of accessibility and equity.

Crucially, the field has lacked coherent definitions of 'open', and too often tended towards optimism, advocacy, and conviction, rather than a critical understanding of what openness might mean for education. Moreover, it is the vagaries of the term itself that have allowed it to be attached to other ideas so readily: to notions of self-directed learning and cohesive community interaction; and to technology and the presumed capacities of the digital networks that enable educational activity to take place. In these ways, 'open' has too often accounted for the assumed ease with which educational hierarchies can be horizontalised, and economic and geographic barriers can be dissolved. But more than this, openness has too often assumed that institutional structures, financial constraints and distance are the only issues preventing the instinctive and effortless uptake of self-directed learning. It is precisely in this way that an uncritical championing of openness fails to adequately analyse educational *closures*.

Many approaches to open education have been guided by the assumption that students fall into a universal category of rational, self-directing, and highly motivated individuals. Much less common is

[1] https://oer15.oerconf.org/
[2] https://oer16.oerconf.org/

the acknowledgement that openness reconfigures or maintains particular notions of learning, teaching and human being; that it is involved in the production of our contemporary understanding of ourselves as educated and educating beings. Part of the appeal of openness has derived from its association with a broader restructuring of education around the idea of the 'learner'. This 'learnification' (Biesta 2010) has tended to assume autonomous students, whose independent activity requires educational opportunity with instantly and universally accessible material, anytime admittance, and teachers who merely 'facilitate' the process. The assumption is that 'we' are naturally open, and for all this time it has been the institution that has disciplined us into being closed. However, this idea of openness relies too heavily on the logic of self-direction, and fails to engage with the de-emphasis of teacher contact, problematic forms of student isolation, the appropriation of academic labour, and a neglect of the social and political dimensions of an education that surfaces in globalised classrooms. Such openness is only a solution for the imagined autonomous subject, and is only imaginable where education is divorced from the complexities of culture, sociality, and the power of the political. Furthermore, the restructuring of the role of the teacher and the implicit de-professionalisation of teaching is overlooked in this drive for openness. The open education movement can at times seem worryingly amenable to forces of neoliberalism within the university.

The papers in this special issue all engage in various ways with this complex, problematic, troubling and exciting landscape of 'openness'. Combining the empirical with the theoretical, conceptual and polemic, this collection helps us understand where we are now with 'the open', how we got here, and the obstacles and openings we now face as scholars and practitioners who have a stake in shaping its futures.

The following mapping of the content of this special issue may help readers get a sense of the contibution it makes: rather than using it to target reading, we hope you will read them all.

> Richard Edwards writes around the exclusions built into all forms of education, even the open, foregrounding the particular 'inscrutability' inherent to its digital forms and the often opaque and elusive agency of code, algorithm and ontology that makes them possible.
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> Richard Hall takes on the task of theorising a political economy for MOOCs, drawing our attention to the risks we face in allowing open education to become a neoliberal project and technology innovation merely about the 'valorisation of capital': he proposes instead a form of resistance located within the Commons.
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> Bonnie Stewart considers the notion of 'academic influence' and the ways it is expressed, measured and wielded in the open scholarly networks of social media. Using Haraway's concept of 'diffraction' she explores the effects of networked scholarship on the concept of influence.
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> Lesley Gourlay draws on Latour and Foucault's *heterotopia* to interrogate the ways in which dominant accounts of 'openness', rather than coming from a position of critique, in fact tacitly reinforce monolithic social categories by underconsidering the day-to-day lived experience of students and academics.
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> Chris Jones interrogates the relation between openness and technology, situating 'openness' within the broader sociopolitical contexts both of austerity and technological possibility: he argues against an austerity politics which fails to view education as a public good, suggesting that open education must be sustained by public policy if it is to resist the corporate appropriation of academic labour.

Rolin Moe draws our attention to the messy boundary between 'authentic' OER and branded video edutainment, proposing that the former needs to work better to define itself in resistance to the latter, and using a framework drawn from Lyotard to situate this work within a critical understanding of the future of education.

Martin Oliver writes against the reductive open/closed binary and instead proposes a sociomaterialist emphasis on 'permeability' which continues to value institutions while recognising that their social and material boundaries are leaky and contingent.

Joss Winn brings a Marxist perspective to bear on the failure of open education – in its focus on the 'freedom of things' – to pay proper attention to the 'freedom of people' and in particular to interrogate forms of academic labour.

**References**

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